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Subject: Elections Don"t Stop
Date: Sunday, March 15, 2026 8:37:08 AM

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Elections Don't Stop

While we watched the results roll in last week, let's not forget the people who made it possible — even in the middle of a hurricane

CHRIS COOPER
MAR 15

READ IN APP

We just finished the 2026 primaries in North Carolina. And, while the major storylines are about the outcomes, we should take note of the people who didn't make the headlines: election administrators.

That's as it should be. Election administration is a profession whose measure of success is when they're invisible. Perhaps no better example of their success—and their importance—came last year during Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina.

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When Helene hit Western North Carolina, elections were the furthest thing from people's minds. Roads were washed out. People were without power, without water,

without cell service. Top of mind were safety, food, and shelter.[1]

And yet, a small group of election administrators had come to work anyway.

As one of them later explained: “We’re all election nerds, so we’re going to be here come hell or high water—well, regardless of the hell or the high water, we were here.”

While they were there, a woman pulled into the handicap spot outside. She was in her mid-50s. She’d just moved to the area two weeks before the storm. No running water. No electricity. No working phone. She’d been driving around looking for any resources she could find when she spotted the elections office.

She said she just “wanted to do one normal thing.”

She wanted to register to vote.

They got her registered.

That story—and dozens like it—are at the heart of a paper I recently published with eleven of my graduate students in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*. The students were enrolled in my election administration course at Western Carolina University. As part of the class, each of them interviewed a local election official in the areas affected by Hurricane Helene. What they found was remarkable: a group of largely unsung public servants who refused to let a natural disaster stop democracy.

The quote that opens our paper comes from an election administrator in Western North Carolina: “Elections don’t stop. We voted during the Civil War and every other tragedy. Elections don’t stop.”

They weren’t wrong.

What the Storm Revealed

Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina on September 27, 2024—just three days after counties had mailed out absentee ballots. Many of those ballots were still sitting in mailboxes throughout the region when the storm arrived. Internet was

down. Phone lines were cut. One county lost both for over eight days.

And yet the election had to happen.

The logistical challenges were staggering. Counties lost polling places overnight and had to consolidate, reassign voters, and find new sites—fast. Early voting sites were cut. Election officials had to physically inspect sites in person, driving roads that were barely passable. One director delivered absentee ballots by ATV to communities where rivers had washed away the roads and bridges.

The budget situation was equally grim. Election offices in this region—like most rural election offices in America—were already operating on thin margins. Hurricane Helene didn't care about their fiscal year. New equipment had to be purchased. Poll workers had to be recruited from scratch in some locations. All of it had to come from existing budgets.

And yet they pulled it off.

The Radio from Texas

One of my favorite details from the students' interviews captures just how improvised this whole effort was. One election official showed the student interviewer a tiny retro radio—a gift from a colleague that just happened to be sitting in their office. For days after the storm, it was their only connection to the outside world.

At first, all they could get was a station out of Texas.

Eventually, they picked up a station out of Asheville.

That's how they stayed informed. That's how they ran an election.

Blue Sky Relationships

One concept that kept coming up in the interviews was what one official called "blue sky relationships"—the idea that you have to cultivate trust in your community during good times so that you have people to rely on during hard times. Those

relationships—with emergency management, firefighters, IT departments, county commissioners—turned out to be the difference between counties that managed and counties that barely survived.

The stronger the preexisting relationship between voters and election officials, the more likely constituents were to maintain faith in the process despite the surrounding chaos.

Something Normal

Perhaps no story captures the moment better than this one, offered by an election administrator in Western North Carolina:

It's the Tuesday after Helene had hit and I'm walking outside to get something out of my car, the county offices are closed but we're all here because the election is coming, we don't have a choice, well I mean, we had a choice, but we're all election nerds so we're going to be here come hell or high water.

Well regardless of the hell or the high water we were here, so I'm walking out to my car, and this lady pulls into the handicap spot, and she's probably in her mid-50s, and she asked me, she says: "are you guys open?" and I said, "well technically the county offices are closed, but what can I help you with?" and she goes, just kind of does that exhausted laugh that we all sort of did during Helene, a lot, and she goes: "I just moved here two weeks ago. I don't have running water, I don't have electricity, my phone doesn't work, and I was just out looking for any resources I could get and I saw the elections office" and she's like "I just wanted one normal, to do one normal thing, and I wanted to register to vote."

So, of course, of course, we got her registered and everything.

What It Means

What my students and I found in those interviews was a group of people who stayed when they could have left, improvised when the playbook ran out, and kept their eye on the mission when everything around them was falling apart. One official put it simply: voting can "bring a sense of normalcy to the lives of voters." In the aftermath of Helene, that normalcy meant something.

The paper ends with another quote from a Western North Carolina election official: "We pulled one off in a pandemic and we pulled one off in a hurricane. We're afraid to see what '28 will bring."

Same.

Some Other Notes

- The county canvass process concluded Friday and Sam Page still leads Phil Berger by 23 votes in the most watched state senate primary in North Carolina history. A press release from the Berger campaign said that they would likely call for a recount (which any candidate would in this situation), we don't know much else. Both Berger and Page have lawyers and legal funds lined up, but the press release says "no decision has been made" on any of this—including the machine recount. Keep an eye on this one, as the deadline for requesting a machine recount is Tuesday.
- There's more going on than just Berger/Page; there are currently election protests filed in Vance, Granville, and Yancey Counties.
- According to data from the Wesleyan Media Project, there were 4,044 ads run in the U.S. Senate primaries in North Carolina at a cost of 2.4 Million dollars through the beginning of March. That probably sounds like a lot, and in some ways it is, but it also puts the Senate race in North Carolina eighth in the country in terms of ads run and seventh in terms of ad dollars spent.
  North Carolina's primary was the earliest in the country and although much, much more money to be spent, the relatively low volume of ads and ad spending (particularly on the Republican side) causes me to wonder whether we will have a competitive race in North Carolina, but perhaps not one that will break spending records—despite the previous predictions of many (including me).
- North Carolinian and the master of the political profile, Michael Kruse, is leaving Politico for the *New York Times*. I'm a big Michael Kruse fan, so this move made me happy that I am a *New York Times* subscriber (and if I weren't, it would make me become one). In a note about his move, Breaker noted that the number of journalists at the *New York Times* has doubled over the last ten

years and four percent of journalists in America now work for the Old Grey Lady. That's a serious investment in journalism.

1

This post is based on "A Buoy in the Storm: Election Administration as Public Administration in the Wake of Hurricane Helene," published in the Journal of Public Affairs Education, co-authored with Shaun Adams, Tiffany Anderson, Adeshola Bamodu, Kaitlin Guyer, Haley Johnson, Miles Kish, Jacob Morgan, Kristen Robinson, Hunter Rogers, Nathaniel Speier, and Stephanie Sweeney

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